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Communicating with Your Teen

Original author: **Shannon L. Sachs**, OSU Extension

Revised by **Kara Newby**, Human Development and Family Science, OSU Extension

One of the most important parenting practices is good communication. Communication is especially important during adolescence, when old patterns of communicating may have to be altered to fit the growing needs and capabilities of your adolescent. Just as your relationship may seem to be changing, so is your communication.

During adolescence, teens are striving to gain independence and develop their own sense of self, while at the same time needing a strong sense of connection to parents, family, and peers. Studies have shown that the development of autonomy and attachment during this time is not something that the teen is doing independently. In fact, this individualization is something that parents and teen are co-creating. The parent is actually helping the teen to develop these essential pieces of identity. Research has shown a relationship between parent-adolescent communication and several adjustment outcomes, such as adolescent self-esteem, academic achievement, and well-being. More specifically, adolescent adjustment has been linked with a balance of positive and negative discussions with parents.

Creating an Atmosphere for Communication

One of the most important aspects of parent-teen communication is trust. Your teen must feel that he or she can trust you, and the parent must be able to trust (and communicate that trust to) the teen in the things that he or she is sharing. Parents must strive to create

an atmosphere in which all family members are free to discuss whatever topics they need to discuss. Flexibility in family communication allows the adolescent to express himself or herself. Teens need an opportunity for open and honest self-expression. By developing and using good communication skills, sensitive issues that arise during adolescence, such as sexuality and drug or alcohol use, can be discussed with greater comfort and success. In fact, research has shown that adolescents who share more openly with their parents are less likely to abuse substances and are more likely to be influenced by a parent concerning sexual relationships.

Finding time to communicate with your teen may prove to be a challenge in today's busy world. Devoting just a few minutes a day to listening actively to your teen is a good place to start. Arrange a time when you are both free to talk about the day. Remember, it is important to let your adolescent share without feeling pressured into sharing.

Let your adolescent know that you accept and value his or her point of view and that you respect his or her opinion. Often, parents can get held down by cultural stereotypes of teens, which can influence the way they hear their own teen communicate. It is important to really listen to teens and think about what they are saying through their perspective. Confirmation of an adolescent's perspective has been linked to positive personality development. Parents need to understand what adolescence is like in today's society, as well as the pressures and choices adolescents face.

Guidelines for Effective Communication

In order to solve family problems, it is important to be able to discuss them openly. Effective communication involves both listening and speaking. Good listeners show an interest in what the other person is saying. Consider the following guidelines, and how you might use them to improve your family communication skills.

1. **Draw a mental picture of what the other person is saying.**
Ask questions to help you complete the picture in your mind. This will let the other person know that you are taking an interest in his or her topic.
2. **Withhold advice unless you are asked to give it.**
Hear the other person out. Do not interrupt or add your opinions until the speaker has finished. Your job is to listen with understanding, not make judgment calls. During this difficult transition of your teen, it's important that you do not try to "overparent."
3. **Be an active listener.**
An active listener summarizes the speaker's statements to check for understanding. Ask questions to keep the conversation moving. By asking for more details, you will help to stay focused on the topic.
4. **Learn something new from the speaker.**
Take the role of the student, so that your adolescent becomes the teacher.
5. **Stay focused on the other person.**
Do not use this time to interrupt with one of your own stories.
6. **Match the speaker's emotional state, unless it is hostile.**
You will help the speaker feel accepted if you match his or her mood. This also shows empathy, or reassurance that you understand and can identify with the speaker.

7. **Put yourself in the other person's shoes.**
Try to understand your adolescent's perspective. This shows that you respect his or her point of view, even though you may not agree with it.
8. **Think before you speak.**
You may want to count to ten before you respond. This will create an opportunity for you to compose yourself and avoid a heated discussion.
9. **Encourage the other person.**
Even when discussing sensitive or emotionally charged topics, let your adolescent know that you still care about him or her. Think of something you like about him or her.
10. **Be pleasant.**
Keep the conversation positive by talking about how you might want to solve the problem. Don't get entangled in past mistakes. Look for the positive side of the message. Staying positive will help keep the conversation productive and constructive.

Try using these active listening skills with your adolescent. After some practice, introduce your family to the idea of using effective communication skills. Describe the guidelines presented here, and take turns being the listener. See the difference that good communication skills can make in your family!

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Keith L. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, Ohio State University Extension
TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868